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# **Expressing and responding to self-efficacy in meetings between clients and social work professionals**

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## Abstract

Self-efficacy is a pivotal element when the long-term unemployed are to increase their chances of labour market participation, making the ways in which clients' beliefs in their capabilities are reflected in the delivery of public employment services particularly relevant. While existing research has pointed to the importance of both meetings with social services and self-efficacy for return to work, little knowledge exists on how self-efficacy is managed in these meetings. However, if social work professionals are to effectively enhance clients' self-efficacy, knowing *that* self-efficacy is important is not enough; knowing *how* to support self-efficacy becomes crucial. Based on observational data material from a qualitative study following 14 Danish vulnerable welfare recipients, we find that employability self-efficacy can be expressed by clients in strong, weak or ambiguous ways and that social work professionals responses to clients' expressions can range from supporting to transferring to challenging. Insight into the detailed ways in which self-efficacy is managed in the institutional framework of employment services, we argue, provides a starting point for reflexive consideration on how to develop employability self-efficacy in practice.

Keywords: self-efficacy, service delivery, conversation analysis, unemployment, social work practice

## Introduction

Unemployment, and especially long-term unemployment for individuals with problems besides unemployment, is a social problem that has gained increasing attention in the Nordic welfare systems over the last decades. Despite the relatively generous benefits of the Nordic welfare systems, research has illustrated the social risks of prolonged unemployment in regards to poverty (Ejrnæs et al. 2011; Økonomi and Indenrigsministeriet 2014) and social marginalization (Horneman Møller 1996). The coexistence of unemployment and problems related to physical and mental health (Diderichsen, Andersen, and Manuel 2011), as well as inequalities in who becomes—and stays—unemployed (e.g. Røe 2011 on ethnicity), puts unemployment at the centre of a range of (other) social problems.

Several studies have examined the effects of different types of interventions on bringing unemployed people into work (Danneris 2016). Among these, Rosholm

and Svarer (2010), Brown and Koettl (2012) and Arbetsförmedlingen (2014) have indicated that meetings between employment service professionals and clients have a central role in bringing clients closer to work, though it continues to be unclear how, and what kinds of conversations bring about this development.

Preliminary findings of a large study of indicators for progression toward work suggest that the client's own *beliefs* that he or she can return to work is one such indicator (KORA, Aalborg Universitet, and New Insight 2012). Similarly, Eskelinen and Olesen (2010) and Christensen and Nordentoft (2011) found that clients' perception of whether or not they are capable of changing their situation is central for their progression and return to work. This is supported by the larger study behind the analysis presented in this paper. By following 25 clients and their contact with employment services over a period of two years, self-efficacy is identified as one of the central factors for the progression of clients' labour market attachment (Danneris 2016).

Based on existing and on going research, then, self-efficacy is a crucial factor for return to work for clients in long-term unemployment. In this paper, we depart from the psychologically oriented approaches to self-efficacy dominating the existing literature, and apply an interactionistic approach, examining how self-efficacy can be recognized in interactions between professionals and clients, and how professionals respond to client expressions of self-efficacy in different ways. While existing research has pointed to the importance of both meetings with social services and self-efficacy for return to work, to the best of our knowledge, no one has looked at how self-efficacy is interactionally achieved in these meetings. If professionals are to effectively enhance clients' self-efficacy, knowing *that* self-efficacy is important is not enough; knowing *how* to support self-efficacy becomes crucial.

### **Self-efficacy and unemployment**

As a theoretical concept, self-efficacy has been widely recognized, especially within the field of psychology, as constituting a key factor of human agency. Developed by Bandura, self-efficacy was originally defined as: '*beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of actions required to produce given attainments*' (1997, 3). Bandura's theory of general self-efficacy has been

adapted to several specific areas of interest. In the literature of social work, Bandura's notion of self-efficacy has been studied in relation to social work students especially (e.g. Holden et al. 2008), as well as different client groups (e.g. Schofield and Beek 2005) and social work practitioners (e.g. MacAteer, Manktelow and Fitzimons 2016). This literature have to a large extent examined self-efficacy as an indicator of learning, behaviour and/or specific competencies (e.g. Guilamo-Ramos et al. 2008; Danis et al. 2007) or as a possible outcome of specific courses, interventions and programs (e.g. Carpenter et al. 2015, Moxley 2002).

In relation to unemployment, adaptations have taken the shape of 'job-seeking self-efficacy' (Strauser and Berven 2006), 'career decision self-efficacy' (Rasouli, Dyke, and Mantler 2008) and 'reemployment self-efficacy' (Westaby and Braithwaite 2003), among others, each focusing on a specific aspect of the move toward employment. Existing literature has shown that self-efficacy is especially related to job-search intensity (Eden and Aviram 1993; Wanberg, Kanfer, and Rotundo 1999), but also employment (Green et al. 2011).

Most of the existing research is based in psychological and cognitivist understandings, seeing self-efficacy as something pertaining to the individual's internal state and cognitive capacities. While we recognize the importance of self-efficacy, we do not understand it to be something that is inherently intra-individual. Rather, we approach the concept from an interactionist perspective, linking the beliefs of the individual with the surrounding world, especially looking at the role of interaction in shaping, expressing and managing self-efficacy. While some authors have discussed how to conceptualize and operationalize self-efficacy in regards to social work (e.g. Petrovich 2004, Furstenberg and Rounds 1995), the matter of how to work with self-efficacy in social work practice, as well as how self-efficacy might take shape in interaction is under-examined.

Even though Bandura's conceptual framework is closely tied to the individual's own beliefs and expectations, Gallagher posits that it is a responsibility of society and institutional systems to provide sufficient opportunities for everyone to engage in experiences that will stimulate a stronger sense of self-efficacy (2012, 318).

Thus, self-efficacy should be understood as a social product that cannot be treated as a matter of putting pressure on the individual. McDonald and Marston (2008) have studied self-efficacy in the context of public employment services indicating

that the attitudes of professionals are important for promoting self-efficacy in clients. Also focusing on professionals' role in developing clients' self-efficacy, Blankertz et al. (2004) present a model that focuses on developing self-efficacy through the alliance between counsellor and patient. While other studies have indicated positive (Creed, Bloxsome, and Johnston 2001) as well as non-significant (Tisch and Wolf 2015) effects of specific programmes on clients' self-efficacy, the research of both Blankertz et al. (2004) and McDonald and Marston (2008) indicates the importance of the interaction with individual professionals for supporting and developing self-efficacy.

In this paper we focus on self-efficacy with regard to employability. We understand employability in this context as the skills and capabilities that make clients more (or less) likely to gain employment. Employability for unemployed people with problems besides unemployment is not just about having the skills needed to obtain a job (job search skills as well as formal qualifications), but also about being physically and mentally able to perform and fulfil the demands associated with a given job. We define employability self-efficacy (ESE) as the perceived ability to perform skills associated with raising employability. These skills could range from contacting and/or making arrangements with employers and performing functions in a given job to managing one's own disability and learning new skills to compensate for them. Departing from an interactionist perspective, we do not understand ESE as something a person either possess or does not, but rather, as a phenomenon that are talked into being in dynamic and contingent ways, and that may be expressed more or less strongly in interaction with different people, in different settings, at different times and regarding different aspects of employability.

While we understand employability self-efficacy to be a crucial factor for moving long-term unemployed towards employment, it is only one of several aspects at play in long term unemployment. A preoccupation with ESE should not conceal the structural factors associated with unemployment of vulnerable client groups. Even the strongest individual ESE cannot compensate for a lack of jobs or for discriminating hiring practices, but strengthening ESE may enable clients to take advantage of the possibilities they do have. Working with client ESE thus walks a fine line between empowering clients and building their capabilities on the one hand, and becoming (yet another) disciplining tool of the active labour market

policies seen across Scandinavia. Understanding how self-efficacy is and can be employed in practice, we argue, is the first step to social work practices that uses ESE to empower rather than to discipline.

### **Examining self-efficacy in institutional interaction**

The analysis of how self-efficacy is managed in interaction is inspired by the method of conversation analysis (CA). By looking at the detailed ways in which clients and social work professionals interact in conversation, we aim to gain an understanding of *how*, specifically, self-efficacy is managed through talk. The branch of CA concerned with institutional interaction directs attention to how professional work is done through interaction, linking the concrete micro-interaction to the institutional context these interactions are situated within (Heritage and Clayman 2010). The expressions of and responses to ESE thus have to be understood in the context of the institutional task of the meetings analysed, that is, to bring clients closer to labour market participation. We examine *expressions* of self-efficacy, essentially constructed accounts given with some regard to the institutional context. As such, the context poses limitations on what are allowable and preferred contributions (Drew and Heritage 1992), and it cannot be assumed that expressions of self-efficacy precisely reflect the beliefs of the individual. This is especially so in the setting of employment services. As Toerien et al. (2015) and Müller & Wolff (2015) have illustrated institutional interactions under ALMP are concerned with categories of motivation and focusing on client's resources rather than limitations. At the same time, being perceived as having little or no limitations in work ability might mean that demands of activation are increased or benefits or other types of support are cut or removed. Mäkitalo 2006, Caswell et al. 2013 have illustrated how clients orient to and talk into such categories, and how resisting the expectations of focusing on resources are delicate matters that need to be managed interactionally. In this case, expressing a complete lack of ESE may for instance, be seen as a lack of motivation if it is not legitimized in a corresponding (documented) lack of ability. So, for many clients, expressing ESE is a potentially risky business that may or may not result in them balancing their expressions. However, for practitioners, client expressions are the only entrance into the beliefs of clients, as well as one of the main tools of supporting or inducing change in these beliefs.

CA builds on the basic observation that conversation is structured around

situated norms of turn-taking, and that a speaker responds to the previous speaker's turn based on his or her understanding of that turn (Drew and Heritage 1992). Though the theoretical concept of self-efficacy focuses on the client as the agent of action, it follows from this approach that the professional, as conversational recipient of expressions of self-efficacy, plays an important role for enabling client expressions as well as for development and/or maintenance of positive expressions of self-efficacy. Thus, we find it crucial to not only look at how clients express self-efficacy, but also to examine professionals' responses.

### **Method and data: A qualitative longitudinal study**

The Danish social and employment services have undergone several large reforms over the last few years, moving social work interventions for adults with complex social problems away from social services and into the remit of active labour market policies within the employment services. While legislation calls for holistic and personalized interventions that include clients' wishes, these policy reforms mean, that employment are set up as the primary goal of social work intervention and that clients are subject to principles of activation, conditionality and sanctioning. Following from this, the data for this article are derived from a larger qualitative longitudinal research study about active labour market policies aimed at vulnerable welfare claimants done by the first author (Danneris 2016). The fieldwork took place in Denmark from spring 2013 through to summer 2015. For this paper, only audio recordings of naturally occurring data from meetings with the employment services have been included<sup>1</sup>.

The clients in the study ranged in age from 30 to 59 years old, with varying backgrounds in terms of family status, educational background, and unemployment history, as well as the type and extent of their health and/or social problems. Common for all were unstable labour market participation in terms of holding short-term, unskilled jobs; dropping out of education repeatedly; and extended periods on welfare benefits. At the time of the first interview, all clients received a cash benefit.

Fourteen meetings were observed across six Danish municipalities. Depending

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<sup>1</sup> The national authority of data management has approved collection and management of data - and each client has consented to participation, been giving full anonymity as well as the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time during the data collection period.



on the purpose of the meetings, they took place at either local Jobcentres or at specific work places where the client was enrolled in an in-job placement. The meeting varied in length from around 30 minutes to one hour, most of them about 45 minutes.

Participating social work professionals were employment services caseworkers, job consultants, mentors, an at-home supporter and an activation manager. The overall institutional task of meetings was to improve clients' chances of labour market participation. The specific task in the individual meeting varied from a largely administrative purpose of following up on the client's situation as required by law to being more specifically aimed at finding a relevant programme or visiting the manager at an activation site.

After an initial verbatim transcription of the data, all recordings were examined in order to identify relevant excerpts that were then transcribed in detail following the CA conventions (Hepburn and Bolden 2013). Expressions of ESE were identified in the data when clients expressed thoughts on their ability to perform actions that they themselves believe raise their employability. Professionals' responses were identified in their turns addressing client ESE, whether or not these occurred immediately or later in the conversation. The focus of the following analysis is variations in expressions of and responses to ESE. These variations are analytically constructed and do not hold the intention of providing a full list of expressions and responses to ESE. Thus, it is possible that other variations would be found if additional data was analysed, if other client groups were included.

Patterns of expressions as well as responses have been identified across all 14 recordings but for sake of illustration will be exemplified by specific excerpts in the following analysis.

### **Analysing clients' expressions of employability self-efficacy**

We understand ESE not as something clients either have or do not have, but rather, as something a client may express to a higher or lower degree, and to different degrees in relation to different attainments. Accordingly, in the following we present examples of strong, ambiguous and weak expressions of ESE, illustrating throughout how ESE is expressed in detailed ways in interaction.

### *Expressions of strong ESE*

Expressions of strong ESE occur when clients express a strong confidence in their own capabilities to perform tasks that they themselves indicate as relevant for enhancing their employability. In the following excerpt, we see one example of a strong ESE, from a meeting between Harry, his caseworker in the employment services and his at-home supporter. The meeting is a standard follow-up meeting in Harry's case, where the purpose is to talk about Harry's current situation, his progress in the activation program he is participating in, and what to do next in his case. Immediately prior to the following excerpt, which takes place 8:34 minutes into the meeting, Harry had told his caseworker that he had been in contact with a local butcher about a work placement, and that he was now waiting for them to get back to him.

*Excerpt 1: Strong ESE<sup>2</sup>*

- 1 Harry: Yes but well  
I would like to try to take my own  
life in hand,  
you know, like,  
do something by myself.  
It: it wouldn't hurt at all.  
So, that: that's what I [will try
- 2 Caseworker: [That is  
really good
- 3 Harry: <Well, my plan was,  
if I was told today,  
that well it is a no from them,  
well then I would go: to some other  
butchers in ((town)) and say well,  
if they could use someone.
- 4 Caseworker: °Yes↑°
- 5 Harry: Well,  
I just have to hang on to these things  
I have sort of figured out now,  
that it shouldn't be too <early>  
and it has to be three and a half  
hours a day,  
and the number of hours shouldn't vary

<sup>2</sup> Transcription key in Appendix 1.

- 6        Caseworker:            No, and then hang on to that.
- 7        Harry:                    Yes
- 8        Caseworker:            Yes.  
                                      Good.

Though the choice of ‘try’ (turn 1) does indicate some uncertainty about the outcome of the actions to be proposed, the continued use of unmarked formulations in relation to his planned actions (‘I would go’, ‘and say’ in turn 3), as well as the concretization of the more abstract formulations in his previous turn (‘take my own life in hand’, ‘do something’) gives off a strong impression of being able to take the action needed to—possibly—bring about the wanted outcome. That Harry has not only launched a plan for action, but also outlined an alternative plan should the first attempt not work out, further works to produce a strong expression of ESE in terms of arranging a work placement.

In turn 5, Harry addresses the barriers he is likely to meet in a work-related situation, implicitly referring to his own personal barriers for performing in a job. His turn frames these barriers as fairly easily managed by starting off with a mitigating ‘just’ and then naming a few concrete precautions, giving the impression of a strong ESE in terms of managing his personal barriers for work. Harry’s use of mitigating formulations when talking about possible barriers and unmarked statements when addressing his intended actions augment his expression of ESE as being strong.

In terms of turn-taking, the excerpt is structured around Harry’s account of his attitude toward the progression of his case. From turn 1 onward, Harry is initiating and continuing talk, only interrupted by short confirming statements by the caseworker (turns 2, 4, 6 and 8) that signal agreement but offer no further input to Harry’s account, effectively letting him hold the ‘floor’ (Schegloff, Sacks, and Jefferson 1974). The turn-taking structure lets Harry act out an initiating role, and his statements are unprompted by the professionals in the meeting. In addition, he continues to express his ESE throughout the excerpt even though his turns are being met with acceptance and what may be perceived as closure-initiating responses (turns 2, 6 and 8), in that they offer aligning and topic-bounding formulations (Schegloff and Sacks 1973), all of which points to the expression as being especially strong.

The excerpt is typical of expressions of strong ESE, in that ESE is demonstrated on a content level through statements of confidence in capabilities related to the performance of concrete actions, of thoughts on alternative actions and concerning

several different aspects of employability. On an interactional level, phenomena such as conversational agency and initiative, as well as unmarked statements when addressing capabilities and mitigators when addressing potential barriers serve to augment the expression of ESE.

### *Expressions of ambiguous ESE*

Ambiguous expressions of ESE can take different forms, but essentially occur when a client purports to be uncertain or conflicted about his/her own efficacy. In the empirical data, this occurs when clients are explicitly uncertain, when clients' statements change during a single observation and when clients express strong ESE when referring to some goals and weak ESE when talking about other goals. The following excerpt contains elements of the last two of these.

The excerpt is from a meeting between David, his mentor (not speaking in this excerpt) and his job consultant. The meeting was held on David's initiative, because he was dissatisfied with the work placement he was in at that time. We enter 13 minutes into the conversation after David had told his job consultant that he would prefer a work placement at a department or company to the activation programme he had just completed.

#### *Excerpt 2: Ambiguous ESE*

- |   |                 |                                                                         |
|---|-----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | Job consultant: | How would you feel about having to:                                     |
| 2 | David:          | Well I have always found work by myself in the past.                    |
| 3 | Job consultant: | Yes.                                                                    |
| 4 | David:          | It has never been >it has never been< a problem for me to find work=    |
| 5 | Job consultant: | =No                                                                     |
| 6 | David:          | =Even when people say they can't find any work.                         |
| 7 | Job consultant: | °No° (0.2)<br>°°No°°                                                    |
| 8 | David:          | >And then it< is just a bit frustrating to be in a situation that (0.2) |

you really want to have a job,  
but (0.7)  
but just can't.

9      Job consultant:      °No° (0.7)

10     David:                In the past I could have said (0.2)  
I:ah normally began in the industrial  
area around six in the morning,  
and then I just started from  
one end and walked down to the other=

11     Job consultant:      =Yes, yes

12     David:                =And then in the end they got so  
tired of me that they gave me a job  
[because I did it every

13     Job consultant:      [Yes, haha  
Yes, now come on!  
Ha ha ha haaa.  
Yes.  
[That is a very good attitude

14     David:                [((unclear))

15     Job consultant:      to have.  
Right

16     David:                Yes but (0.2)  
the problem was that then maybe  
a month -month and a half went by,  
and then I h-had to call in sick  
(0.5)

17     Job consultant:      Yes=

18     David:                =And then it went on with three  
months healthy,  
three months sick,  
three months healthy,  
°three months sick°.

19     Job consultant:      Mmh °°yes°°

In turns 2, 4 and 6 David responds to the job consultant's question (turn 1) regarding his self-efficacy in relation to finding a work placement with an employer. By drawing on positive experience of mastery, David indicates confidence in his capabilities to set up the work placement, which is strengthened by the very strong expression of the

consistency ('always found work' turn 2; 'never been a problem' turn 4), as well as superiority of his previous accomplishments (turn 6).

However, in turn 8, David makes a shift in his line, giving off the sense of an ambiguous ESE. On the one hand, David expresses a strong belief in being able to find and contact an employer. On the other hand, his expression shifts when he talks about being able to complete an internship or work engagement in turns 16 and 18. By using the formulation 'I had to call in sick' David externalises the action as being outside his sphere of action, which is amplified when he later indicates an on-going and uncontrollable process ('and then it went on', turn 18).

In this case, ambiguity is expressed through shifting lines of ESE, from expression of a strong ESE in relation to finding a work placement, to expressions of a weak ESE in relation to maintaining and performing in such a placement. Another typical feature of expressions of ambiguous ESE is seen in turn 8, in which David expresses how he 'really want[s] to have a job', but 'just can't'. In the institutional context of the employment services, the legitimating expression of being motivated but incapable is a recurring interactional strategy for clients accounting for troublesome behaviour, seeking to assure caseworkers of their deservingness (Matarese and Caswell 2013).

### ***Expressions of weak ESE***

Expressions of weak ESE are the counterpart to expressions of strong ESE, and concern talk in which clients display low or non-existent beliefs in their capabilities to raise employability. One such expression is demonstrated in the following excerpt. Rebekka is at her regular status meeting with her caseworker in the Jobcentre and they have begun to talk about possible job functions. This topic has been preceded by a discussion on Rebekka's wish to continue her dyslexic's class while her caseworker argues that within a short period of time Rebekka need to start thinking about a future in the labour market. We enter 9 minutes into the meeting, where the caseworker suggests montage as an area that would suit Rebekka's capabilities.

#### *Excerpt 3: Weak ESE*

1	Caseworker:	>I am thinking<, well within the area of of montage, you would be capable of-
---	-------------	-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

2           Rebekka:                 Yes yes,  
but I just won't be able to do it  
for very long,  
because it isn't (0.2)  
something for me,  
in the long run I think.

3           Caseworker:           Mm, >that is then< another problem.  
And >this is [where< you have to get

4           Rebekka:                                 [Yes

5           Caseworker:           started now.  
But I was thinking (0.5)  
well browse online,  
find out, well,  
is there any jobs where you (0.5)  
could say, this you would like to do.  
>Then it might [be< that there (0.2)

6           Rebekka:                                 [°Yes°

7           Caseworker:           just exactly that task you can't  
solve, but,  
but then there is a small part of it,  
>or [something< where we

8           Rebekka:                                 [Yes

9           Caseworker:           could say, well here we could  
actually do some supportive functions  
within the [workplace, [that

10          Rebekka:                                 [Yes                 [Yes

11          Caseworker:           took your knee into account↓.

12          Rebekka:                 Yes.  
Yes yes of course.

13          Caseworker:           <So it is not, well,  
don't look at all the limitations  
we will have to work around them=

14          Rebekka:                 =Yes, yes yes=

15          Caseworker:           =But, but find three jobs=

16          Rebekka:                 =Mm (0.7)

- 17 Caseworker: where you say that this thing could actually be interesting=
- 18 Rebekka: =Well somewhere I do have a bit of a dream, but I don't think it could be (0.5) something because there you have to get up at (0.2) very early in the morning. Hhh and then I also don't think my knee cou- >would< manage anymore so [it's just ((unclear))
- 19 Caseworker: [>Well, that 'getting up< in the morning' that, that I don't ca- tha- that

In the first turn, the caseworker expresses confidence in Rebekka's capabilities in terms of finding a job within montage, leading Rebekka to the interactionally troublesome act of interrupting the caseworker (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974), with an immediate need to challenge this confidence. Rebekka's turn is symptomatic of an expression of weak ESE, in that it both explicitly states a low belief in employability ('won't be able'), and presents it in unequivocal terms ('just won't be', 'it isn't, something for me') indicating both an evident and unchangeable character of the stated situation.

In turn 3 the caseworker challenges this expression by giving an answer which clearly indicates that Rebekka's attitude is not legitimate within the institutional framework, and that she just has to get started now. In Rebekka's following seven turns (4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14 and 16), she only responds to the caseworker's turns with minimal or short responses. According to Juhila, Caswell, and Raitakari (2011), minimal responses can signal resistance, especially so in the context of asymmetrical dyadic interactions between a professional and a client who is dependent on the resources controlled by the professional. That this is the case here, is supported by the fact that Rebekka earlier displayed a considerably more active role in interrupting the caseworker (turn 1) and that she, when responding with a fuller remark in turn 18, maintains her limitations despite the caseworkers expanded instruction not to do so (turns 5, 7, 9, 11, 13).

In turn 18 Rebekka initially goes along with the caseworker and tells her that she actually does have a dream job. However, the formulation ('somewhere', 'a bit of a dream') signals distance and unrealism, and is followed by a write off ('I don't think'),



maintaining the expression of a weak ESE. Thus, Rebekka goes to lengths to establish her dream job as something airy and unspecific even before she has said what the job is about. In the same turn, Rebekka refers to having to get up early in the morning as a barrier for managing this dream job, following up with the additional and more institutionally legitimate barrier of health problems. In the following turn (19), the caseworker connects to the early start, addressing the fact that having to get up early is not a valid reason for not taking a job, within the institutional context of the employment services.

Rebekka expresses some motivation for getting a (certain) job, but does not communicate any belief that she has the capabilities to execute the actions necessary to manage such a job, thus indicating a weak ESE. Rebekka's expression of a weak ESE is characteristic of similar expressions in our data in that it expresses an unequivocally low belief in her capabilities in relation to employability, it describes her situation as unchangeable and due to causes that are out of her control or agency, and it legitimates her expression with the institutionally relevant clarification that she would like to work if it were possible.

### **Professionals' responses to expressions of employability self-efficacy**

Looking closely at the detailed ways in which professionals respond to client expressions of ESE provides important insight into the ways self-efficacy is shaped in social interaction. Based on analysis of responses to client expressions of ESE, we present three different categories of responses in the following sections. They are not exhaustive categories of all occurring or possible responses but empirically based analytical categories that provide a starting point for reflexive consideration on how to develop ESE in practice.

#### ***Supporting responses to expressions of ESE***

As a general rule, supporting responses align with the expressions of ESE. While this might seem self-evident at first glance, 'support' as a category can take different interactional forms that have different consequences in terms of how engaged a supporting response comes off. Within the category, then, we have supporting responses that range from somewhat empty non-responses to more actively ESE-building responses, suggesting that ESE-development requires more than 'just support'.

Excerpt 4 is from a conversation between Barbara and her caseworker in the employment services, where Barbara is at her regular meeting. Barbara and her caseworker have been discussing Barbara's work placement in a local grocery store, and Barbara expressed a strong ESE, in terms of performing well in the work placement and possibly being able to turn the placement into flexible employment. We enter in the end of the meeting, 23 minutes into the conversation, where Barbara has just expressed that she will be very happy if she succeeds in gaining a permanent flex job in the local grocery store.

*Excerpt 4: Supporting response*

- 1      Caseworker:            This will work out.  
                                 [It is this way we're going now.
- 2      Barbara:                [Of course, well it will, yes
- 3      Caseworker:            <And you have worked your butt off  
                                 to do it
- 4      Barbara:                .hh well I think so.
- 5      Caseworker:            Yeah,  
                                 and you have really made a change
- 6      Barbara:                Well, I think so too,  
                                 I have made a really big change.  
                                 I do think so.
- 7      Caseworker:            For the positive.
- 8      Barbara:                [Absolutely, yeah
- 9      Caseworker:            [The happy and not so grumpy and  
                                 ↓no °I mean°, but but but  
                                 there has been a difference,  
                                 you do have more energy,  
                                 you [exude more energy,
- 10     Barbara:                [Yeah
- 11     Caseworker:            you: look happier a- (2.0)  
                                 Well.  
                                 So that is lovely.
- 12     Barbara:                Well I think so too, so (1.0)  
                                 Just to get up every day,  
                                 even though you are,

are you in pain, but well,  
it's just up and then:

13 Caseworker: Get going

14 Barbara: Get going,  
get your morning coffee,  
and get the boy up and

Throughout the excerpt, the caseworker gradually moves to more detailed levels of granularity (Schegloff 2000), from starting out with the quite general statement 'This will work out' (turn 1), through 'you have really made a change' (turn 5), to the concretely elaborated 'you have a lot more energy, you exude more energy, you look happier' (turn 9-10). Granularity denotes the level of detail in a given set of data, and in the excerpt we see the increase on both the content level and in the references to agency, as the caseworker 'zeroes in' on Barbara as the primary agent of change. Where the agency in the first part of turn 1 is almost absent in the passive formulation, the turn continues with a 'we', that is then further narrowed into a 'you' (turn 3) that for the rest of the caseworker's turns is joined with expressions of action ('you have worked' turn 3; 'you [. . .] made' turn 5; 'you do have' turn 9). By detailing the change Barbara has made, as well as her own agency in bringing about that change, the caseworker produces a strong account of Barbara's mastery experiences in strengthening her employability.

Barbara responds with aligning responses that are becoming more active and affiliative as the caseworker continues her supporting expressions. The caseworker's short statements in turn 7 ('for the positive') and 11 ('So that is just lovely') are increments of her previous statements that provide minimal additional information and do not further the progress of the interaction. Following Stivers (2008), they can thus be seen as an attempt to elicit a different response from Barbara, compared to the aligning yet non-additive ones she has provided up until this point. The caseworker's push for a different response finally produces an affiliative statement (turn 12) from Barbara detailing in her own words how she is capable of managing her health situation.

The above example is placed toward the more active end of the category of supporting responses since the insisting and concrete expressions of support from Barbara's caseworker leads Barbara to elaborate on her own capabilities. In contrast, Harry's caseworker in Excerpt 1 can be seen as an example of a more passively supporting response to ESE. The caseworker's short, aphorism-like responses, in a

turn-taking structure in which Harry is initiating, align with Harry's expressions of ESE without engaging with or furthering the conversation or assessment.

### ***Transferring responses to expressions of ESE***

The category of transferring responses covers responses that largely support expressions of ESE, but attempt to transfer these into specific actions that may increase employability. The category is based on empirical phenomena identified in the data, but is linked to Bandura's point that self-efficacy does not equal the actualization of beliefs into action (Gallagher 2012). The category recognizes professionals' attempts to transform expressed belief of capability into concrete actions in practice, as a distinct category of responses that holds special potential for social work.

The excerpt below is from the same meeting as Excerpt 1; Harry and his at-home supporter are meeting Harry's caseworker in the Jobcentre for a follow-up in his case. As has been demonstrated previously, Harry expresses a strong ESE, and the following excerpt occurs shortly before Excerpt 1, 7:30 minutes into the meeting.

#### *Excerpt 5: Transferring response*

- |   |                 |                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|---|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | At-home support | But <u>if</u> ,<br>it tu:rns out to be a 'no' =                                                                                                                                   |
| 2 | Harry           | =Yes=                                                                                                                                                                             |
| 3 | At-home support | =Then get a hold o:f of of<br>((contact at private provider))<br>again right=                                                                                                     |
| 4 | Harry           | =Yes, yes, but I'll do [that                                                                                                                                                      |
| 5 | At-home support | [Because that was<br>kinda the deal we made the last time,<br>that ah: in-<br>instead of you going around doing nothing<br>for a waiting period,<br>you might as well stay there. |
| 6 | Caseworker      | Yes, because I can extend that<br>period with ((provider)),<br>if it is.                                                                                                          |
| 7 | Harry           | Yes but that sounds very reasonable (1.2)<br>Yes (0.7)<br>Well it was >a bit of a gamble,<br>that thing with that ((butcher))<                                                    |

- but I was: pretty sure
- 8     At-home support     Yes but it might be that it works out
- 9     Harry                Yes I think so too
- 10    At-home support     Well tha:t, but, but,  
                               let's get clarity.  
                               Well, and if if the plan is there,  
                               if they say yes,  
                               fine then you can,  
                               then it can be done.  
                               If they say no,  
                               then there's the other plan.  
                               That is that then you continue at  
                               ((provider)) u:ntil we get a  
                               chance to talk to the job consultant who  
                               possibly finds another placement.
- 11    Harry                Yes

In turn 1, the at-home supporter addresses the possibility that the work placement in question might not work out, which goes against Harry's strong expressions of ESE in this regard (see Excerpt 1 above). This disalignment is mitigated by emphasizing the 'if' of the turn, underlining the hypothetical character of the suggested situation. The 'if' is followed up with a 'then' in turn 3, completing the hypothetical situation with an imperatively shaped turn that presents a concrete set of actions for Harry to perform, should the work placement not work out.

In these two short turns, the at-home supporter presents an alternative plan for action, which maintains Harry's agency and ESE, while the passive form of 'turns out to be a "no"' (turn 1) avoids placing the responsibility for failure on Harry, thus avoiding questioning his capabilities. The caseworker's response in turn 6 is interesting in relation to transferring responses, in that it suggests a concrete action that aligns with the at-home supporter, but does so in terms of the bureaucratic action needed ('extend the period with the provider'), serving to make Harry's role opaque.

Harry's turn 7 expresses a markedly weaker belief in the efficacy of his efforts than earlier in the meeting (see Excerpt 1). The initial expression of acceptance is followed by two pauses and a reference to the work placement in the past tense ('it was'), as a 'gamble', and with a distancing choice of determiner ('that thing'). The at-home supporter catches this downgraded expression of ESE and responds with a remark that maintains the feasibility of the plan (turn 8). This balancing between maintaining

and supporting Harry's ESE on the one hand and setting up alternative plans for action on the other is seen in turn 10 as well.

By outlining alternative plans, suggesting concrete actions and avoiding challenging Harry's ESE, the at-home supporter attempts to transfer Harry's expression of ESE into concrete actions that might bring Harry closer to work. Another example of a transferring response is seen in Excerpt 3, in which the caseworker responds to Rebekka's expression of a weak ESE with a very concrete assignment to look for three types of jobs she might find interesting. The two cases illustrate how there is no automatic or certain relation between specific kinds of expressions of ESE and a 'corresponding' type of response; transferring responses can be put into use following strong as well as weak expressions of ESE if done so relevantly in the situation.

### ***Challenging responses to expressions of ESE***

Challenging responses seek to adjust expressions of ESE, based on the professional's assessment of client efficacy. Challenging responses can attempt to nuance expressions of ESE in both up- and downgrading directions, but will in both cases often involve balancing acts such as recognizing client barriers while 'talking up' client capabilities, or downgrading specific capabilities while maintaining optimism or efficacy in other areas.

The excerpt below illustrates a challenging response that nuances the client's expression of ESE in a downgrading direction. Marianne is at her regular meeting with her caseworker in the Jobcentre. Prior to the following excerpt, which takes place 20 minutes into the meeting, they have been talking about her wish to start in a work placement, while the caseworker has suggested participation in a programme involving counselling.

#### *Excerpt 6: Challenging response*

- 1 Caseworker:                   And it's not that,  
                                          I don't think you can handle a work  
                                          placement >or something like that<  
                                          but I'm just thinking that it wo:uld-
- 2 Marianne:                   °°Oh, but it does look annoying°°  
                                          °if you get out and then call in sick°  
                                          because all things considered,  
                                          I do always take a letter of  
                                          recommendation with me from there=

- 3 Caseworker: =Yes
- 4 Marianne: Ehm.  
[Of course I could not ask [but you know
- 5 Caseworker: [That's right [Yeah yeah  
But I might also be thinking (2.0)  
Ehm, that, that we ah,  
we should do what makes sense right  
now, and perhaps we should do it i:n.  
°Perhaps we shouldn't take too big  
steps now°
- 6 Marianne: °Well, no°
- 7 Caseworker: [And then that might be where we start-
- 8 Marianne: [How long time ago was it,  
that I told you I would surely have a  
job in .h[hhh ((long sigh))
- 9 Caseworker: [Yeah  
But I still think it's good  
to be an optimist.  
It's always good to be an optimist.  
That things then change and there are  
some stuff that means that (0.5)  
and there are some external factors as  
well, that makes things change,  
that you also can't (0.2)  
control either.

The caseworker starts her challenge with a disclaimer that clarifies what she is *not* thinking ('it's not that I don't think'), simultaneously signalling the challenge to come ('but I'm just thinking'), and mitigating it by instructing Marianne not to take the challenge as a doubt in her abilities. According to Hewitt and Stokes (1975: 3) disclaimers are interactional resources used to avoid in advance any doubt or negative typifications that may result from the coming statement. This touches on the link between interaction and social identity. Situated identities are established by and known to participants in an interaction, and interaction that fails to fit the relevant identities threatens their continuance (ibid.). When professionals challenge client expressions of ESE in a downgrading direction, it is thus a delicate matter that needs to be managed interactionally, as it questions the identity the client is projecting. In the excerpt, the use

of the disclaimer in the first turn is one such tactic for managing challenge (ibid.), as is the continued use of mitigators throughout the excerpt ('just', 'might', 'perhaps') and the use of rather abstract language (e.g. 'what makes sense', 'shouldn't take too big steps' in turn 5 and 'things change', 'some stuff' in turn 9). By handling the matter as highly delicate and setting up an (un-explicated) opposition, it becomes clear that the caseworker does not share the assessment of a work placement as a relevant way forward, even though she at no point explicitly says so.

At first Marianne is quick to respond in an aligning way that allows for the caseworkers' challenge in turn 2 (ibid.). While at this point she slightly downgrades her expression of ESE (having to 'call in sick'), she maintains a position of agency ('take a letter of recommendation', turn 2) and keeps the door open for the placement ('I could not ask', turn 4). In turn 8, however, Marianne expresses some frustration with her situation, leading the caseworker to balance her downgrading remarks so far with a turn that calls for optimism and externalizes the reason for not setting up a work placement right now ('things change', 'external factors', 'you can't control').

The caseworker in the excerpt challenges client expression of ESE in a downgrading direction by adjusting the plan for action. The avoidance of explicitly challenging ESE indicates the delicate matter of such an action. At the very beginning (turn 1) of Excerpt 3, we see an example of challenging ESE in an upgrading direction, which more explicitly touches upon the question of the client's ESE and more directly expresses disalignment, illustrating how upgrading challenges are less delicate to perform.

## **Concluding discussion**

Examining naturally occurring data from conversations between clients and professionals within the Danish employment services, we have identified three orientations (strong, ambiguous and weak) in client expressions of ESE, and three categories of professional responses (supporting, transferring and challenging). While all expressions and responses occur repeatedly throughout the empirical data, and thus across several municipalities and individuals, we cannot on the basis of this study assume any direct generalizability to other settings or meetings, nor that the identified patterns of talk are the only ones to be found. However, taking the contextual and contingent nature of social work into account, we argue that detailed analysis of naturally occurring interaction provide a valuable basis for reflection on *how* to work



with client's ESE (Lamerichs & te Molder 2011), as well as a starting point for further examination of ESE in social work practice.

Throughout our data it is clear that no expressions automatically elicit particular responses, and, we argue, no response category can be said to 'fit' a certain kind of expression in a generalizable way. This follows the perspective that ESE is not something an individual either has or does not, but rather, something that is talked into being in the meeting, making the social work professional's abilities to recognize and respond adequately in the situation crucial.

The detailed examination of professionals' responses have, for instance, made it clear how a supporting response is not just a matter of aligning with the client's expression and how transferring responses may hold more potential than supporting responses when trying to create change in clients' lives. While both supporting and transferring responses may at first glance seem more in line with the active labour market policies seeking to motivate and activate the long-term unemployed, there will also be situations where a challenging response is more appropriate from both a social work and policy perspective. Fulfilling the potential of mastery experiences for developing ESE requires a qualified assessment that the client will be able to complete the suggested action in a satisfying manner, lest the experience becomes a 'master' for failure instead. As such, the decision whether to support, transfer or challenge—and how to do it—must be made reflexively on the basis of the concrete knowledge of the client, and performed in situated interaction. The result of the interactionist approach to social work research taken up here can therefore never be a standardized guide for interaction. Rather, by making 'visible and available for discussion' the everyday practices of social work (Hall et al. 2006:171), detailed descriptions of actual practice holds a reflexive potential for strengthening both practitioners' interactional skills as well as underscoring the importance of such skills in social work (ibid; Antaki 2011).

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## Appendix 1: Transcription key

[xx]	Overlapping talk
(0.2)	Pause in seconds, when more than 0.2
=	Latching
-	Cut off, of others or self
<u>xx</u>	Emphasized talk
°xx°	Markedly quiet or soft talk
°°xx°°	Particular quiet, such as whispering
↑	Sharp change upwards in pitch
↓	Sharp change downwards in pitch
>xx<	Fast paced or rushed talk
<xx>	Slow paced or drawn out talk
x:	Prolongation of sound
((xx))	Comments or edits
.hh	audible breathing, such as sigh or intake of breath